

# 1

## Spongeon-Uglies

The sharp clapping of hooves echoed throughout the maze of underground tunnels and torch-lit corridors below the Castle of Urkeneye. Ezrick tightened his grip on Argo's reins and threw a glance over his shoulder at the rider behind him. A scrawny girl, with stringy blonde hair cut level with her jaw, was bobbing up and down in her saddle like someone in a wagon trundling down a pothole-ridden street. One of her arms cradled a large red box.

"Hey, Mad!" Ezrick shouted, his words nearly swallowed by the clamor. "You ride like a girl!"

Maddie's face screwed into a scowl and her indigo eyes flashed.

"You—try—holding—box—ride—at—same—time!" she screamed, her words joggling into one another.

Ezrick turned back around, grinning. Wavering shadows

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flickered past as he came to a fork and raced down another cobblestone pathway of the Dungeon. The air turned stale and the ground sloped downward. Ezrick leaned forward, his face whipped by Argo's wildly flapping mane. A violent thrill rippled through his body. They were almost there...

Then he saw the door. Flanked by two glowing torches, it loomed before him like a horrible gaping mouth.

Ezrick caught his breath and yanked Argo's reins. The horse gave a piercing cry and skidded toward the door. Ezrick braced himself to be thrown off as they veered to the side, Argo's hooves scraping across the stone floor.

Maddie rode swiftly past him, sticking out her tongue.

"Maddie, look out!"

She turned around—

"AAUGH!"

The box crashed to the ground as her scrawny arms wrenched the reins. Her horse staggered to a standstill inches from the door. Argo slowed to a halt. The Dungeons rang with silence.

"Blast!"

Maddie Baker jumped off her horse, her bare feet slapping against the cold floor. She picked up the red box and quickly checked it for damage. "Lucky this didn't bust open. We're gonna break 'em before we get there. Don't think anyone would appreciate a couple o' Uglies on the loose... Ezrick?"

Ezrick, who'd hardly heard a word she'd said, felt suddenly lightheaded. His mouth was dry and his heart pounded, but

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his eyes never left the door. Maddie followed his gaze. She bit her lip.

“Oh... Right.”

They were in a long “T”-shaped corridor and standing before a great, egg-shaped door.

“I’m fine. Really,” Ezrick lied. The ache in his chest pained him to speak, as if some giant, invisible hand were crushing him inside its fist—though whether the ache was from longing or dread he couldn’t tell.

Ezrick tore his gaze from the door and patted Argo’s neck. “I just forgot we’d pass the Vault. It’s my mother’s and everything. I wasn’t prepared to see it.” He caught Maddie’s worried stare. “*I’m fine!*”

“Well, it’s not much farther anyway. Let’s tie up the horses at the end of the tunnel.” She shoved the box under her arm, grabbed her horse’s reins, and started down the right-hand corridor. “Curious we’re still alone, ain’t it? The Glooms usually grab us at the fork. Think the witch’s told ’em to surprise us for once?”

“She wishes!” Ezrick dismounted and started after Maddie. He dared a glance at the door one last time. His blood ran cold.

“We *are* headed for the Old Cellar, right?” he heard Maddie say. “...always get lost in this place. You know, if we don’t hatch ’em soon they might as well do it on their own.”

“Maddie! Come here!”

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Maddie stopped and looked back down the corridor.

“Quick!” Ezrick shouted.

For a moment she didn’t budge. Then, just when Ezrick thought she was going to ignore him and continue down the tunnel, she sighed, shifted the box to her other arm, and shuffled toward him, dragging her feet.

Erick removed one of the torches from its bracket and neared the Vault door. Steel bolts and hinges gleamed in the firelight, and suddenly the strange marks flickered into focus.

They appeared to be gashes, slashed frantically across the grain in no apparent logic or order, but simply as if some violent animal had been determined to get into the chamber beyond. Edging closer, Ezrick saw jagged splinters standing rigid in deep grooves. Slowly, he ran his fingers along the ripped wood, tracing the map of gashes with his own nails. His skin prickled from a sudden chill.

“What is it?” Maddie asked. Her indigo eyes grew wide when she saw the marks. “Whoa! What’s this?”

“I think someone’s been trying to get inside,” Ezrick murmured.

Maddie shook her head. “Some *thing*, more like. Those marks ain’t human. Look at that.” She pointed to the steel lock on the right side of the door where the wood was black and charred. “They’ve tried to burn through the door.” She slapped the door with a grubby hand. “An’ this thing’s got to be two feet thick.”

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“Think we should look around?”

Maddie flung her hand in exasperation. “Not now! We’ll be caught!” But then, as if remembering it *was* his mother’s Vault they were arguing about, she added, “We’ll come back later.”

“All right,” Ezrick rasped. “Keep it down.”

She was right, of course. He knew they didn’t have much time. The Glooms would find them any minute now, and his stepmother, Vicursa, would lock them in the Dungeons herself if she knew what they were up to.

Maddie’s eyes darted back to the door. She frowned. “Tell your father about the Vault, though.”

Ezrick stiffened. “Tell him yourself.”

Maddie was suddenly inches from his face.

“Look, it’s not my fault your father hates you!”

With a withering glare, she stormed back down the hall toward her horse.

Ezrick cursed himself for being so immature. Torch in hand, he yanked Argo’s reins and sulked after Maddie despite the horse’s indignant snorts.

But the Vault... Who was trying to get into his mother’s Vault? And why? Ezrick furrowed his brow. A break-in was serious. His father would want to know if someone had broken into the Castle. And if Ezrick were the one to tell him... If the King *needed* him...

They walked down a row of crumbling cells and tied the horses to a pair of bars. Then it was through a narrow

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corridor, down a spiraling staircase, and under a low archway in the pit of the Underground, before they finally reached the Old Cellar.

It was seldom used but for storing provisions, thus providing a perfect place for the hatching. Save for a few wooden barrels and an ancient well in the corner, the place was empty. After racking the torch and blocking the door with a couple hogsheads of milled oats and grain, Ezrick and Maddie hastened to the well.

“You do know what you’re doing, I hope,” Ezrick said, settling down on the floor.

Maddie shot him a look.

“Just checking!”

Rolling her eyes, Maddie set down the box and began searching her pockets. Ezrick studied the box that she’d been carting around since her return from the village.

Though similar in size to a milk crate, the box’s shape was most peculiar. Crafted from stitched leather, it had many faces, like a gemstone, and was more round than square. A border of coiling vines snaked along the edge of the lid, with a golden tree embossed in its center. The naked, twisting boughs stretched upward while deep running roots writhed below, squirming off the lid and down the front, where they encircled an ornate lock.

“Found it!”

Maddie flourished a tarnished brass key, then stuck it into the keyhole. With some difficulty she turned the key and the

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box unlocked with a rusty *CLICK!* Slowly, the lid creaked open of its own accord, revealing the glowing contents within. There, nestled in a bed of moss and brown leaves were two polished eggs, about the size of the pigskin Ezrick kicked around the Gardens. One of gold and the other pale blue, the eggs had a pearly, liquid shine to them, like wet jewels glistening in the sun.

*Gold and blue*, Ezrick marveled, *the royal colors of Urkeneye.*

Hesitantly, he reached into the box and picked up the golden egg, slowly turning it over in his hands. It was heavier than he expected, like a stone. The shell sparkled in the torchlight.

Maddie was breathing heavily, her cheeks flushed.

“How—How do we hatch them?” Ezrick asked. “Maddie?”

Maddie blinked. “What? Oh, the fellow who sold ’em to me said there was instructions.” She began rifling through her pockets once more, without any luck. “Blast! He gave me the key and then, where...? I can’t remember where I put ’em.”

Ezrick didn’t know much about Ugly eggs, but he knew they were special, and that they wouldn’t hatch on their own. There had to be instructions, and they would most likely be hidden safely.

He returned the egg to the box and thought a moment. On a whim, he ran his hand along the inside of the lid. His heart leapt.

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“There’s something here!”

A flap of parchment was hanging from the underside of the lid. Ezrick slid his hand farther and removed a folded document.

“Here, practice.”

He tossed Maddie the parchment and went back to examining the eggs.

Maddie’s face hardened. She unfolded the paper with such aggression Ezrick was sure she’d rip it in half. Squinting in concentration, she began to sound out the words printed in fading ink.

“HAT-CHIN-GUH... SP-SPUN-GUH-EE-ON UG...” She scrunched up her nose. “Look, your reading lessons don’t work, okay? Writing is so pointless. People can just *say* what they mean without all those stupid letters. I’ve got better things to do.”

She flung the yellowed paper at him and knotted her arms.

“You’re eleven,” Ezrick muttered. Then he smoothed out the parchment and read the instructions with ease.

# Spungeon-Uglies

## ***“Hatching Spungeon-Uglies from Spungeon Swamp***

*Please read directions carefully before proceeding with your Spungeon-Ugly egg. Adhere to all precautions, and if properly complied with, you shall enjoy a lifelong loyalty and bond with your Spungeon-Ugly.*

- *Keep all eggs in a damp and clammy environment for best results (slimy underground wells and stagnant swamps are superb localities). Please note: Once hatched, warmer climates tend to promote disagreeable tempers, notably ferocious appetites, and a nasty habit of belching at inopportune times.*
- *Immediately after your egg comes into contact with any type of liquid it will begin to hatch, and the Internal Unity Ritual must be performed. This is accomplished by holding the Spungeon-Ugly and allowing the Bonding Bite to incur, ensuring that your Spungeon-Ugly has been eternally linked to your spirit and will answer only to your authority (if for some reason a new Unity Ritual must be performed, please see \* below).*
- *Spungeon-Uglies excel in spitting fire, cutting glass, delivering messages, and swimming (though contact with liquid strengthens their natural “swamp” instincts and weakens your bond). **Every creature, however, has its own unique ability, which will be discovered in time.***

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- *Healthy, all-natural diets prevent scale rust!*
- *Finally, as it is illegal to raise Spungeon-Uglies and keep them as pets, you should be arrested.*

*Best of luck!*

*\* To unite your Spungeon-Ugly with another spirit, the Spungeon-Ugly must be taken back to its original hatching site, recontacted with a liquid, and a new Bonding Bite must be performed.\**

Ezrick trembled with excitement. “Let’s hatch them in the bucket!”

Tossing the instructions aside, he rolled up his sleeves and helped Maddie slide off the dusty board from the well. A second board was already propped against the wall as if recently removed, judging by the fingerprints along the edge.

Ezrick peered down the murky hole and nearly retched at the stench wafting up from the depths. Their reflections shone dimly upon the water some twenty feet below.

“Sick,” he said, holding his nose. “Sbells like supthin’ died down there.”

Maddie winced and pinched her nostrils shut. “Hobefully the witch won’t get any ideaz.”

Ezrick drew up the bucket, making sure there was an inch of water at the bottom.

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“Hey, what’s all that?”

Maddie pointed to what looked like red and black flower petals floating along the bottom of the bucket.

Ezrick shrugged. “I don’t know. Let’s just hurry and get this over with before we’re caught.”

Together they placed the eggs inside the bucket and waited.

Seconds passed. The eggs began to quiver. Then, with a sudden *C-R-I-I-C-K*, sharp, jagged cracks streaked up the shells’ smooth surfaces, the pieces splitting apart like toffee brittle. Heart pounding, Ezrick watched as a small claw emerged from a crack in the golden shell. Moments later, two lizard-like heads were poking out the top of each egg. They’d done it! The Spungeon-Uglies had hatched!

Ezrick’s head rushed with excitement. With quivering hands he helped Maddie pick off the remaining pieces of shell from the creatures, now curled up in the bucket like kittens. Their eyes dazzled like diamonds, their metallic scales gleamed, and atop each head protruded blunt, bronze horns. Like the eggs, one Ugly was gold while the other mirrored a luminous summer’s sky.

“They look a bit like crickodiles—don’t you think?” Maddie asked.

The creatures could definitely pass as crickodiles, Ezrick thought, with their sleek scales and horns. Only, their brilliant coloring and the damp, translucent wings sprouting

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from their backs didn't remind him of any crickodiles he'd ever seen.

"I'm sure they're what Uglies are supposed to look like," he said weakly. "Ugly."

Maddie managed a tight smile.

"Can you read the directions again? 'Bout that bonding thing?"

Ezrick scanned the document and cleared his throat. "Um, you're supposed to hold the Ugly and allow the *Bonding Bite* to incur... Whatever that means."

Maddie nodded, wiped her forehead, and cautiously picked up the blue Ugly. A black forked tongue darted from its mouth.

Then it happened. There was a flash of blue and Maddie screamed. The Ugly fell to the floor and scuttled back into the bucket.

"It bit me! It bit me, Ezrick!"

Ezrick rushed to Maddie's side and grabbed her arm.

"Calm down, Maddie! Calm down! Where's the bite?"

"I DON'T KNOW, BUT IT HURTS!"

"Hold still," Ezrick said through his teeth, but Maddie shoved him away and staggered backward. Her eyes were rolling and she looked about to pass out. Ezrick caught her just as her knees gave out, and lowered her to the floor.

"Mad? Mad!"

Panicking, Ezrick shook her until her eyes snapped open and she gasped.

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“Mad, can you hear me? Are you all right?”

“I—I think...”

“Let me see.”

Ezrick gently pried Maddie’s hand out of a fist and prepared himself for the gory wound.

There was no blood.

“Maddie, where—?”

“I felt its teeth, somewhere deep inside,” she said, breathless. Then all of a sudden, she wilted. The Old Cellar fell strangely quiet.

Ezrick looked around the room, then back at Maddie.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, alarmed. “Does it still hurt?”

She looked at him, rather dreamily now, her gaze cloudy and distant. “Not really... Now it just kind of tickles. A little numb is all.”

Ezrick watched the color drain back into her face.

“*And?*”

Maddie shrugged. “The pain’s gone now, actually.”

Ezrick groaned. “That must’ve been the Bonding Bite. But there’s not a scratch on you. You’re sure you haven’t been poisoned?”

“Positive. Just a little dizzy, that’s all. Come on, I’ll be fine. You’ve got to go next!”

Still shaking, Ezrick pushed up his sleeves and approached the bucket. His shirt was stuck to his back with sweat, and the sight of the creatures made his stomach lurch. He became suddenly aware of their slender snouts, pointy teeth, and—

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were their nostrils smoking? Maddie's Ugly began unfurling its wings.

Fear seized him. What was he *doing*! Ezrick thought suddenly. Spungeon-Uglies were *illegal*. If he and Maddie were caught, they'd be arrested. Ezrick had to remind himself that this was worse than lessons with Vicursa.

"Maddie, I—I can't do this."

Maddie rolled her eyes. "Just get it over with, Ezrick. It only hurts for a second, honest."

The blue Ugly was struggling to climb out of the bucket.

"I—"

His gaze shifted to the gold Ugly. It was watching him intently. Challenging him. At once Ezrick found himself lost in its hypnotizing, gemstone eyes.

"Ezrick, we don't have much time!"

Without even realizing it, Ezrick leaned forward and reached into the bucket. He heard a *HISS!* and then—

The Ugly drew back and struck him.

Ezrick screamed. An electrifying pain shot up his arm, throughout his entire body. Tears sprang to his eyes. Reeling backward, he hit the hard, stone floor, squeezing his wrist to calm himself. But the pain was swift and hungry, seeping through his veins, stinging his very soul like poison.

"*Ezrick?*"

The voice was distant and echoed all around him.

"*Ezrick?*"

Ezrick gasped. The air shocked him like a shower of icy

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water, but instantly the pain washed away, leaving him weak and trembling. He felt the cold floor beneath him. His body relaxed. The sting faded to a tingle. He wiped the sweat from his eyes and saw Maddie standing over him.

“You okay?” She held out her hand. Ezrick grabbed it and pulled himself up, still breathing heavily.

“I think so,” he managed, examining his hand. There were no teeth marks anywhere.

“You look terrible.”

“Thanks,” Ezrick muttered.

A sudden clatter caused them to look up.

“Look!” Maddie exclaimed.

The blue Ugly was somersaulting across the floor, having managed to tip the bucket over. The gold Ugly was edging out of the bucket as well, emitting a high-pitched chirp with each step.

Feeling strangely renewed and unafraid, Ezrick bent down and picked the Ugly up. He laughed as its spindly tail coiled around his arm, tickling his skin. The creatures never attempted to bite again.

“Where’s Spungeon Swamp, anyway?”

He and Maddie were sitting with their backs to the well and watching the Uglies flutter and chirp about the Old Cellar, testing their wings.

“South of the Krayägoras, I think,” Ezrick answered. “On an island. How’d you get the eggs?”

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“That peddler from Nicklemist I heard about brought ’em to town. It’s a wonder I got my hands on two of ’em. He only had five. Sold two in the east and the rest out here, including ours, so we’re right lucky. Ugliers are nowhere near cheap. I had to save seven months’ laundry money, plus butcher and pluck the chickens for Mam. Nasty work.”

Ezrick felt his happiness fade but tried not to show it. “I’m going to pay you back, but you know Vicursa won’t let me touch a penny of my riches.”

The truth was, he didn’t know if he *could* pay Maddie back. He couldn’t very well *ask* for money, because then he’d have to explain why he needed it, and so much of it besides. He did know where the Money Vaults were, but hadn’t a clue how to open them, and on the occasion that his father spared him a bit of change, it was always spent in the village before Vicursa could tell him to turn out his pockets.

“Don’t worry. You can make it up to me by taking some of my chores,” Maddie said. “Anyway, I can’t wait to find out about the Ugliers’ special talents!”

“Yeah, what if mine could do schoolwork! Vicursa would have me hanged.”

“Totally.”

Ezrick smiled to himself and hugged his knees. For a moment it felt like they were just two kids with everything in common. That Maddie had never scrubbed a floor, that he had never worn a crown—

An odd clanking noise from the bowels of the Dungeon

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echoed its way into the Old Cellar. Ezrick and Maddie exchanged uneasy glances.

“It’s got to be close to supper time. We should probably head back,” Ezrick whispered.

Maddie nodded.

The Uglies, despite cries of fretful chirping, were put back into the bucket and lowered down the well, disappearing into darkness. Then Ezrick and Maddie started rolling the hogsheads away from the door.

“Come up to my chamber after you’ve been to the Kitchens,” Ezrick said, wiping his hands on his shirt. He helped Maddie shove the last barrel away. “We’ll come back here and feed them.”

“How d’you expect *me* to sneak food from the pantries without anyone getting suspicious? Mam burns my fingers on the stove for pocketing grapes!”

“If the Glooms didn’t notice us barreling through the Dungeons on horseback, no one will miss a loaf of bread,” Ezrick said, opening the door.

He froze.

Maddie gasped.

Giant hands grabbed at Ezrick’s shirt before he had time to think. He squirmed and pushed away, managing to free himself, only to stumble backward and crash into the rough side of a barrel. Maddie was screaming hysterically, struggling to free herself from their grasp.

There were three of them. Three Glooms. They were

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giant men, thick and solid as stone, their faces hidden behind haunting, identical masks of steel. Black, gaping holes for eyes stared vacantly—mere pools of emptiness—while thin crescent slits curled upward into frozen grins.

One of the Glooms, its armor creaking like rusty chains, lunged forward. Ezrick gasped as leather gloves yanked him from the ground.

He kicked and thrashed, cursed and growled, pounded his fists until he couldn't breathe. But the Gloom merely flung him over its shoulder.

Ezrick's strength drained into blackness and his head spun. He fell limp, his body sagging against cutting armor as the grip around his waist tightened. Overcome by exhaustion, Ezrick surrendered.